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Three dozen former intelligence agents gathered at a quiet country inn Saturday to swap tales and take steps to improve the image of the maligned profession.

The ex-spies included a matronly grandmother from Connecticut who once worked for the CIA in Asia and South America and a former OSS operative who helped engineer the surrender of the Nazis in Czechoslovakia at the end of World War

Ex-agents from the Civil Intelligence Agency, the National Security Agency, the Federal Bureau of Investigation and various military and civilian agencies formed a regional chapter of the Association of Former Intelligence Officers.

"The intelligence arm of the United States government is pretty vital," said Michael Speers of neighboring Weston, who organized the meeting and was elected chapter president

"The fact that we have a good one has done more to keep us out of war with Russia than anything else. It inhibits anyone from going off half-cocked," he said.

Speers and John Greaney, the executive director of the national organization, said the intelligence community has been victimized by bad press and a distorted public image.

"We focus on education," said Greaney, a retired general counsel for the CIA.

"There was such adverse publicity toward the intelligence community in 1975..."

Not counting the opportunity for the ex-agents to reminisce, the highlight of the day was a speech by James Bamford, author of a book unravelling the mysteries of the super-secret and powerful National Security Agency.

The NSA, he said, is five times the size of the CIA, accounts for 85 percent of all information gathered by the government's intelligence community and has a budget estimated at \$10 billion.

Yet despite its pervasiveness and power, few Americans are aware of the existence of the NSA, he said.

Some of the retired spies talked willingly about their work; others stopped talking entirely when a reporter advanced.

"Some of them have had bad experiences with the news media," explained Jeff Kingry of St. Albans.